Miles, Mystery &Mayhem

Afterword

The stories in this volume are grouped by an internal series chronology that I could scarcely have imagined when I wrote the first of them. Not only did I not know then how important certain ideas were going to be to my later work, I didn't realize just how long "later" was going to run. It is not quite serendipity that they also form a thematic unit, all touching variously on meditations of mine regarding human evolution, reproduction, bioethics, and gender issues.

Ethan of Athos was my third novel, written in 1985 (published 1986), Cetaganda my eleventh, written in 1995 (published 1996), making these two stories slices of my thinking on these issues exactly a decade apart. "Labyrinth" fell in between, written in 1988 to be part of a planned novella collection, Borders of Infinity, which was published by Baen Books in late 1989. The story also appeared in Analog magazine that August with delightful cover and interior art by Frank Kelly Freas, an artist whose work always signaled "Fun fiction here!" to me back when I read Analog in my teens. Other readers must have agreed, because "Labyrinth" won the Analog reader's poll for best novella that year.

At the time I wrote Ethan of Athos, I had not yet sold any novels, though two completed works were making the rounds of New York publishers. I had, however, made my first short story sale, and on the boost to my morale so provided, I embarked on my third novel. I was

groping around for the magic trick by which I might break in, and among the advice I collected was "Try something short. The editors are less daunted by thinner manuscripts on their slush piles, and maybe they'll read it sooner!" So I was determined to keep the length under strict control. I still wasn't sure I would be able to sell the books as a series, although I quite liked the universe I had begun to develop, so I also wanted the next thing to be series-optional, not dependent on the two prior books but connectable to them if some editor did see the light. But more importantly—in the course of my first novel, Shards of Honor, I had tossed off as a mere sidebar the idea of the uterine replicator. Upon consideration, this appeared to me more and more a piece of technology that really did have the potential to change the world, and I wanted to explore some of those possible changes.

Extra-uterine gestation is not a new idea in SF. Aldous Huxley first used it way back in the early thirties in Brave New World, but being who and where he was, used it mainly as part of a metaphoric exploration of specifically British class issues. I was a child of another country and time, with a very different worldview, and other issues interested me a lot more. Primary among my beliefs was that, given humanity as I knew it, there wasn't going to be just one way any new tech would be applied—and that the results were going to be even more chaotic than the causes.

One obvious consequence of the uterine replicator was the possibility of a society where women's historical monopoly on reproduction would be broken. All-male societies exist in our world—armies, prisons, and monasteries to name three—but all must re-supply their populations from the larger communities in which they are embedded. This technology could break that dependence. I discarded armies and prisons as containing skewed, abnormally violent populations, and instead considered monasteries as a possible model for an all-male society both benign and, provably, viable over generations.

About this time—the winter of 1984–85—I went to a New Year's Eve party given by a nurse friend, and fell into a conversation about some of these nascent ideas with two men. One was an unmarried and notably macho surgeon, the other a hospital administrator with two children of his own. The two men took, interestingly, opposite sides of the argument of whether such an all-male colony could ever be workable. The macho surgeon rejected the notion out of hand; the man who'd actually had something to do with raising his own children was intrigued, and not so inclined to sell his gender short. (The surgeon, note, did not perceive that he was slandering his gender; in bragging about what he could not possibly do in the way of menial women's work, he was positioning himself and his fellows as ineluctably on the high-status end of human endeavor.) It was clear, in any case, that the

topic was a hot one, of enormous intrinsic interest to a wide range of people.

A decade later, in Cetaganda, I explored disparate consequences of the same reproductive technologies in a very different social milieu. The Cetagandan haut use replicators and associated genetic engineering to construct their race's entire genome as a community property under strict central control. Although spread among many individuals, the genome becomes conceptualized as a work of art being consciously sculpted by its haut-women guardians. Where this is finally going, even the haut women do not have the hubris to guess—one of their few saving graces.

In addition, Cetaganda allowed me to do something a writer can pull off especially nicely in a series—critique or comment upon the assumptions of earlier books. I had originally tossed off the Cetagandans as mostly-offstage and rather all-purpose bad guys to stir up some plot action for my heroes. But the Barrayarans had started out as bad guys too, from a certain point of view. The closer I came to them, the more complicated their picture grew. No one is a villain in their own eyes; when I brought the story closer to the Cetagandans, they, too, became more complex and ambiguous. I was very pleased with the effect.

"Labyrinth" returned the themes to ground level; after all, these are people's lives we are discussing here, which come in one size only, Individual. The "masses" are a mere abstraction, a fiction with even less weight than an author's musings, an intellectual construct of extremely dubious morality. And lives are not interchangeable. Or, as I told my daughter back when she was learning to drive: "State Farm will buy me a new car. They can't buy me a new daughter." (Not yet, anyway . . .)

The novella also allowed me to ring the changes through still another social milieu: in this case, Jackson's Whole, and what it might do with the new biological options. On this planet, laissez-faire capitalism has gone completely over the top, as the rule of law enforced by governments with guns is replaced by the rule of guys with enough money to hire guns. Here, the only limits of biotechnology are "whatever money can buy." For chaotic results, this serves up a smorgasbord to make an adventure author's mouth water. Since Miles is the master of chaos, this was a character and a setting made to bring out the most in each other, and indeed they did, both here and in later tales.

One future technology, three societies, three results: more to come, as my time and ingenuity permit. Yet in all these different societies, the test of humanity comes out the same, and it has nothing to do with genetics. No one can be guilty of their own birth, no matter what form it takes. We need not fear our technology if we do not mistake the real

springs of our humanity. It's not how we get here that counts; it's what we do after we arrive.

Lois McMaster Bujold June 2001